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HOUSING PROBLEMS IN FOUR PRODUCTION COMMUNITIES

PART IV: MASSENA, NEW YORK

Summary

Housing is a problem to newcomers in Massena but it has not reached major importance.

A breakdown in Massena's transportation system will aggravate the existing problem for many workers have circumvented the shortage of housing by commuting from nearby towns. These persons are experiencing difficulties with buses and with gas and tire shortages.

The threat of winter is causing considerable concern. Workers are wondering how much longer they can operate their cars. If roads are not kept clear of deep winter snows, many commuters will be unable to reach their work.

Turnover is being caused mainly by dissatisfaction with wages. Some unrest exists among construction workers because of an actual or anticipated return to an 8-hour day. Some workers have already quit because of the high cost of living. Housing is a factor in turnover, but it is not yet of great importance.

Introduction

Massena, situated near the St. Lawrence River in the New York "North Country", is a one-industry town, its whole life tied up with the reduction and manufacture of aluminum. But for the availability of a great supply of cheap electrical energy, it would undoubtedly be just another small town in a region where the formerly important industries of dairying and lumbering have nearly died.

Since the expansion of aluminum production for the national defense program started in 1940, Massena has experienced many of the problems common to "booming" war-industry centers, along with some peculiar to itself.

A large force of new workers migrated to Massena from the surrounding area, from other parts of New York, and from other states (primarily Vermont and Pennsylvania).^{*} Many of the immigrants were construction workers, the majority of whom will depart when new plant building is completed. Other new workers commute from towns and farms within a radius of 50 miles. It is estimated that over a third of the aluminum workers commute. By July 1942, newcomers "outnumbered" the native population.

Housing became scarce. Rents of available living quarters increased. Newcomers were forced to take housing which did not meet their accustomed standards, to pay rentals which they could scarcely afford or which took an undue proportion of their income. Some migrants (principally construction workers) lived in trailers. Some of the workers recruited from outside Massena, who would have preferred to live closer to their work, decided to continue to commute because of the high rents, housing shortage, high living cost in Massena, or because of their dislike of Massena as a place in which to live.

Interviews were conducted in Massena during the latter part of August and in early September. Of the 51 persons intensively interviewed, 14 were commuters. The numbers are too small to permit of quantitative treatment, so that this report is based largely on the qualitative material from conversations with individuals in Massena.

^{*} There are now about 6,500 to 7,000 aluminum workers.

I. LIVING CONDITIONS IN MASSENA FOR NEWCOMERS

Not one respondent in Massena felt that newcomers were getting along badly. That newcomers had difficulty finding a place to live was volunteered by most residents. Integral with housing was the problem of transportation. A large proportion of workers commute daily to their homes in towns from ten to more than fifty miles away. Lower rentals outside of Massena and the absence of family dwelling units in Massena have caused many in-migrant workers to seek housing outside of the city. Old time residents in neighboring cities are increasingly being drawn into the Massena labor market.

"Most of those who have come here are from towns which are not so big industrially. They used to have only a few months work - off and on - now they're getting steady work. When the workers get a place to live in town it will be better. It will stop that long ride many of them have. Add their rents in their home towns to their bus fare and it amounts to big rent."

Cost of Living

Workers in Massena, as workers in all boom towns, resented the high cost of living. They felt that prices were unreasonably high especially in comparison with nearby cities. As one aluminum worker put it:

"They ought to put a bug in the Government's ear that people here are unfair to the public. They figure a man should get his pay on Wednesday and give it to the grocer and so on, on Thursday. Maybe people have to expect these things in a booming town."

Housing and Transportation

Housing was judged to be a problem of major importance by most of those interviewed. However, the problem is not now as intense in Massena as in other war boom cities surveyed, and not as acute as in the winter of 1941-1942. The existence of a surplus housing area, and of a large available labor supply within a radius of fifty miles has forestalled the creation of an acutely overcrowded condition in Massena and has converted the housing problem into a transportation problem for many workers. A breakdown of transportation services will intensify the housing problem.

Most residents now living in Massena are apparently satisfied with their present housing. Twenty-nine of those interviewed were satisfied while five were dissatisfied.

The major sources of demand for more housing come then from workers who feel strongly about their time and place dislocations and who are free to move as well as from those workers who are about to be brought in to work in the plant now under construction. This report applies to the first group only. Here's what the commuters say about housing:

"As far as I'm concerned, if there was decent board and room, I'd go to Massena and stay until the weekend. That is the way to do things if you can, but with the way things are there, I'd rather drive. I guess it'll be hard to get more gas."

"If I could get a good price for the home here, would consider going back to Massena because this is a long way from work."

"If I could find a suitable place to live in Massena, I would move right now. I'd pay the price. It would be worth \$35 or \$40 just to be there."

"There aren't enough houses in Massena. Many more people would live there if they had houses, rather than ride buses or drive."

"I wouldn't live in Massena unless I got a job paying \$75 a week."

A conspicuous problem of commuters is the time and expense involved in getting to work. An army of 2,500 commuters live within an area of approximately fifty miles of Massena. Most of them are from Ogdensburg (42 miles), Malone (37 miles), Potsdam (21 miles), Norwood (17 miles). Three buses a shift go to Potsdam, Malone and Ogdensburg. All along the road there are stops at corners a mile from farms.

Here are some of the problems the men face:

From Potsdam ...

"I just quit Alcoa and came here to Potsdam. Working all day and traveling half the night when I was down there. I'm telling you, I used to have to wait from 4:00 to 6:30

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to get home. I'd be through at 3:30; I'd clean up and I'd never get home until 6:30. I'd leave at 5:15 in the morning to get there at 7:30 and come home at 6:30. That's a lot of hours in between, and that was just to work 8 hours down there. The hard part in so many cases, some have to walk after they get off the bus. I did. It was a 20-minute walk or more if I was tired."

From Norwood ...

"A bus was rented to a school, so now there's one bus short. The men were already standing up before the bus was taken away. The operator tried to get another at Oswego, but he's not sure they'll get one for him. He said the Government won't release 900 or more new buses that can be sold."

"I have to be away from home 12 to 13 hours to work an 8-hour day. It's overtime a man counts on for good wages, but if I stay for that, I miss my bus, and I have to wait two or three hours for another. That means 16 to 18 hours away from home."

Plant accidents were blamed by one man on this steady drain of energy resulting in the weariness of men who are scarcely home long enough to get adequate sleep.

Many commuters are dependent upon gas and tires to get to work. If no gas is available or tires are not procurable there will be a need for housing in Massena far in excess of the present.

From Ogdensburg ...

"Well, of course I commute with three other men. It's one hour each way, easy. If I commuted with the bus I would have to catch the 5:45 A.M. bus to get to work at 7:00. Then no bus out of Massena 'til 6:30; home at 7:30; I couldn't go to the movies or anything. That's why so many commuters use private cars. Unless the gas situation gets a little better, it will be tougher. If the gas rationing keeps on I may have to try to find a place in Massena."

Those who use the buses pay them "a day's wage every week."

Winter weather will intensify the problem for commuters. About half of the workers are worried about the prospects of the characteristically bitter cold winter ahead, with a shortage of gas and tires. Snows are so frequent and so deep that plows must be kept on the roads during almost the entire winter. Obviously if roads are not cleared, some 2,500 commuters cannot reach the Alcoa plant.

II. WHO SHOULD BUILD NEW HOUSES?

In Massena the respondents say that it is the Government's job to build houses. More reasonable rent, Government responsibility for the influx, and the temporary nature of the problem are given as reasons for favoring Government construction.

"The Government should build houses. I've always been in favor of that. They should charge just enough to keep up the property, the repairing, and so on. Give the people a good place to live with a reasonable rent. I get pretty radical at times! You see, a private owner, when he builds a house, expects big profits from his investment, and as wages go up he raises the rents."

"Probably the Government would have to build the houses. It's the Government's plant here!"

"The Government should take care of building houses for workers. At present many builders are unwilling to plunge money into building, because of its temporary nature. Nobody knows if the new plant will last."

Family dwelling units were the type desired by most respondents. Accustomed to large houses and plenty of space, some workers insisted upon detached family dwelling units. Most however, were more or less favorable to the row house type of construction.

For and Against Row Houses

"The small (single family) house is the better proposition. Most people like privacy."

"The permanent ones (row houses) they are now starting have no cellars. They're built in a long series under a big roof-shed. There's no privacy, they're living on top of each other How can shift-workers get their rest - suppose the neighbor wants to play the radio! And what about the children! There are too many houses all together - not enough space!"

"It wouldn't be too bad to live in row houses, if they

furnished heat, light and water. It cost me over \$90 to heat this place last winter - I believe I would be interested. The heating part appeals to me. I would like three bedrooms, but I'd get along with two, I guess."

"If it's not higher rent than what we'd pay anywhere, I guess it would be O.K. to live in a row house. If it was a downstairs apartment, I guess we'd pay as high as \$30."

"We prefer the family-type block houses. The trailer is inconvenient unless it's for a couple. But for children you need the family type. The dormitory is not private enough. Yes, I'd be interested, if it's the family type, because then everything is new, clean. Whatever you get you feel you're entitled to! And the Government don't leave out anything. All the Government housing I've seen is O.K."

Eight of 14 people interviewed who had been in Massena less than six months considered themselves to be potential clients for Government housing; of those who had been there longer, only three of 23 persons talked with, said they would consider moving into Government houses if they were built.

Massena workers were not very well satisfied with the 200 demountable units which Farm Security Administration has already built. Possessing no basements or furnaces these structures are looked upon with skepticism in a climate in which 20-below-zero weather is not unusual.

"The only thing that has them worried is them little Government portables. You know, them little portable houses that they have built in Massena for workers. Two or three foremen are dissatisfied. Those places are just a summer camp in my opinion."

"Not the Government if it's gonna build them little shacks. They are not a real profitable home, just a shell and they cost too much. They are thrown up in five days, right where they will catch the wind, and they use plastic board in them instead of shiplap or plank for sheeting."

III. TURNOVER

The major reason for turnover in Massena is wages. A man can quit a job as electrician's helper in the aluminum plant at 80 cents an hour and work at a similar job for a construction company for \$1.10 an hour.

Some respondents had already quit because of the high cost of living. Housing was apparently a factor in turnover but not yet of major importance.

On some construction work, the hours have been cut to eliminate overtime, and on others such a cut is anticipated. This form of reduction of earnings is a major cause of turnover among construction workers.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE *

1. Have you lived here in _____ very long?
2. How well do you think newcomers (like yourself) are getting along here?
3. Do you feel at home here in _____?
4. How is the cost of living in this town?
5. How are rents around here?
6. What's been happening to your rent recently? (in this town).
7. (If appropriate:) How do you account for the change?
8. In the future, do you think rents will stay about where they are, or go up, or go down?
9. How do you feel rent control is working out around here?
10. Has rent control made any difference to you?
11. Aside from the rent question, how do you feel about the housing situation here?
12. Did you have much trouble getting a place to stay when you first came to _____?
13. Are you satisfied with this house?
14. Do you plan to stay here in _____?
15. Is your family here with you in _____?
16. (If answer to 15 is yes:) Did your family come here at the same time you did?
- 16b. (If family not here or only in part:) Do you plan to bring your family here?

* The interview schedule is that known as Study S67.

17. If you brought your family here, how many rooms would you need?
18. Many people agree that more housing is needed around here. Who do you think ought to build it?
19. There is a shortage of critical materials and the Government is trying to put up housing for as many defense workers as possible with that material. For example they are putting up war apartments for couples, row houses for families and hotel-type dormitories for one and two people and trailers. What do you think of all this?
20. Would you be interested in moving into such Government housing?
21. Which is most important to you - that you live near your place of work or that you live near schools, stores, and things like that?
22. Is it easy for you to get from your home to your work?
23. Do you think that in the future you may have more difficulty in getting to work?
24. There's been a lot of concern about men quitting their jobs. Why do you think people are quitting their jobs in your plant?
25. (If no mention of conditions other than wages and hours:) Aside from wages and hours, how are working conditions in your plant?
26. What is the company doing about it?
27. Are the unions doing anything about it? What?
28. We've talked about some of the things that are bothering people around here. Is there anything else we ought to cover?

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